



COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND EMERGING TRENDS OF ILLICIT DRUG TRAFFICKING AND DISTRIBUTION IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

The impact of COVID-19 can never be over-emphasized. Its emergence has altered and disrupted man's social existence in health, education, communication, business, relationship, transportation, etc. Consequently, the emergence of COVID-19 has given rise to new trends and dimensions of information seeking behaviours and technology adaptation in man's social existence. Its effect with regard to the general direction of illicit drug trafficking and distribution is yet to be ascertained. Therefore, this study is designed to primarily examine the patterns and trends of illicit drug trafficking and distribution in Nigeria during the covid-19 era. The Social constructivism and social construction of technology (SCOT) were adopted to explain the contemporary trend of illicit drug trafficking and distribution. It utilised the available limited secondary data that were collected from relevant local and international drug control agencies as well as anecdotal information collated through the new media to analyze the trends of illicit drug trafficking and distribution during the period of movement restrictions. Findings from the study revealed a spontaneous trigger of the use of Technology Mediated Communication Channels (TMCC) for the sales and distribution of illicit drugs. Sequel to this key finding, the study recommends a proportionate innovative technological advancement by relevant law enforcement agencies in awareness creation, tracking, prevention and apprehension of the culprits of illegal drug trafficking and distribution in Nigeria.

Keywords: COVID-19, Pandemic, Illicit Drug, Trafficking, Distribution.

Introduction

The human Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) outbreak, which started in Wuhan, China, on December 8, 2019, was classified as a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC) by the World Health Organization on January 30, 2020. (WHO, 2020). It is a respiratory virus disease that has engulfed the entire world and overwhelmed the health system of most nations. The pandemic is having a negative impact on our way of life, the public health system, and the global economy. According to the UNODC Research Brief (2020), the virus has killed 250,000 people and infected over 3.6 million people worldwide, prompting governments to take extraordinary action to stop the spread of coronavirus disease. Presently, nearly half of the world's population lives in areas with limited mobility, international border crossings have been shut down, and economies across many nations have seen sharp declines as a result of the closure of non-essential companies.

In Nigeria, the story is not different. According to Jimoh et al (2020), following the Italian index patient who had traveled to a few other nations before testing positive for COVID-19 in Nigeria, it became obvious that Nigeria's pre-COVID-19 preparation was woefully insufficient. The nation recorded its imported COVID-19 index case on February 27 despite the government having increased airport surveillance since January 2020. Jimoh et al (2020). This sparked questions about the efficiency of airport security and, consequently, the nation's overall readiness. In the light of this circumstance, Nigerian government immediate reaction geared towards human and vehicular movement restrictions and interstate national lockdowns in addition to continued airport restrictions to curtail the spread of the virus. This brought about the idea of social distancing which disrupted social relations and limited human social interactions.

This idea of social distancing has impacted



seriously on drug trafficking which heavily relies on legal trade to conceal its activities and on human social interaction to be able to deliver drugs to consumers. Thus, with the restrictions, all facets of the illicit drug markets, from their manufacturing and trafficking to their consumption, have unavoidably been impacted by the efforts taken by Governments to combat the COVID19 pandemic.

The aim of this paper is to investigate the pattern and trend of drug trafficking at this peculiar time of social restrictions. The paper's position arguments have implications for social control of all kinds drug trafficking.

History of drug trafficking in Nigeria

Trafficking connotes illegality, it involves dealing or trading on something that is illegal or prohibited by the law. Drug trafficking occurs when illegal drugs or drugs of abuse are transported from one point to the other for profit and or consumption purposes. The United Nations Office on Drug and Crime (UNODC) 2019 identifies Drug trafficking as a global illicit trade involving the cultivation, manufacture, distribution and sale of substances which are subject to drug prohibition laws. In Nigeria, Drug trafficking is nota new phenomenon, but international drug trafficking has a more recent history of about forty years in existence. Ugwukwu et al (2012) revealed that prior to the years between the late 1970s and the early 1980s, Nigerians were unaware of drug trafficking, with the exception of Indian hemp, which is the sole illicit substance produced in Nigeria. This was confirmed by Asare and Obot (2013) which posited that Cannabis has been available in the region since 1940s, while cocaine and heroin arrived in the 1980s.

Nigeria became a hub for worldwide drug trafficking as a result of the United States' tough stance on drug use and trafficking and as a result of attempts made by international drug lords and producer countries to find alternate channels for delivering their products to the consumer nations (Ugwukwu et al, 2012). Consequently, in order to reach markets in Europe, East Asia, and North

America, heroin and cocaine were transported through Nigeria. Nigeria offered an alternate trade route for these goods starting in the early 1980s for a number of reasons. According to Iwarimie- Jaja (1998), to start with, there were economic troubles following the 1970s oil boom. The unexpected drop in the price of oil, which was and still is Nigeria's main source of income, at the beginning of the 1980s led to an oil glut. As a result, after the 1980s, everything altered drastically. The Nigerian government announced austerity measures, and the nation experienced a protracted period of oil related economic crisis, corruption and improper handling of public funds. Consequently, middle class ambitions could no longer be attained through traditional means due to altered social attitudes and fewer or restricted possibilities as more and more university graduates lost their jobs. The belief that education and hard work would bring prosperity, middle-class social standing, and comfort began to fade (Akeredolu-Ale, 2001). Therefore, the temptation to travel overseas "quickly" in search of "greener pastures" or to engage in drug trafficking for fast money began to gain acceptance. Besides, Nigeria's strategic location was identified in the 1980s as a result of the U.S. government's heightened efforts to obstruct the importation of drugs from the traditional hard drug production nations. This may have been what prompted Shopeju (2005) to contend that "it was not accidental that Nigeria among other Third World Nations became a drug trafficker nation; but the discovery of Nigeria as a drug trafficker nation was accidental."

The UNODC (2020) reported that since 2004, drug traffickers have used West African nations, such as Nigeria, more frequently to smuggle huge quantities of cocaine from South America into Europe and North America. Report on Drug Seizures and Arrest by the National Bureau of Statistics (2020) underscored how prevalent drug trafficking is in Nigeria. The country's total number of reported drug seizures/arrests in 2019 increased by over 1,000 per cent to 621,035, compared to 9,831 in 2018. The NDLEA report also showed that between January and March, 2021 about 2,000 suspected drug traffickers were



arrested in various parts of the country, over 300 convictions secured and illicit drugs worth N75bn seized (Punchng.com, 2021).

Generally, drug abuse, dependence and addiction are sustained and promoted by drug trafficking. Nigeria has a relatively high rate of drug abuse due to the continued availability of illicitly manufactured and diverted pharmaceutical products containing narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances. The National drug use survey indicated that there were about 14.3 million drug users in Nigeria of which close to 3 million suffered from a drug use disorder (UNODC, 2020). This was confirmed by the NDLEA report which revealed that there are about 15 million drug users between the age bracket of 15 and 64 years, 25 per cent of whom were female (Punchng.com 2021). Thus, indicating that drug abuse had assumed an alarming proportion in Nigeria. The most trafficked and abused drug in Nigeria is cannabis, mainly in its herbal form. Cannabis is locally produced in some states in the country and is therefore always available and affordable (UNODC, 2020).

COVID-19 measures and Drug trafficking

Under the direction of the Presidential Task Force on COVID-19, the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) has continued to spearhead the nation's public health response. The NCDC is also collaborating closely with all of the Federation's states to help their pandemic response efforts. With the help of the Federal Ministry of Health and the PTF-COVID-19, the Federal Government of Nigeria has put in place a number of steps to stop the disease's spread and safeguard Nigerians' health. This includes a temporary suspension of all non-essential operations, the closure of schools, a prohibition on overseas travel, idea of social distancing, mandatory use of non-medical facemasks in public spaces - **'No mask, no entry. No mask, no service;** etc. (NCDC, 2021).

The impact of the measures implemented to address the COVID-19 pandemic appears to have been the same in the destination markets and has resulted in massive disruptions in global drug

supply chains (Nwoke et al, 2020; Edward et al, 2021). Nigeria, like many countries across all regions have reported an overall shortage of numerous types of drugs at the retail level, as well as increases in prices, reductions in purity and that drug users have consequently been switching substance (for example, from heroin to synthetic opioids) (UNODC, 2020). Although the cannabis market is still flourishing, there appears to be some level of switching to methamphetamine (*Nkpulummiri*) especially in the south eastern region (Emeka and Ikenna, 2021)

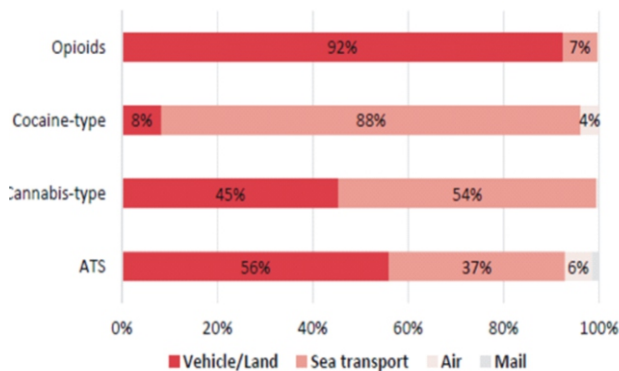
Covid-19 and Drug Trafficking by Air

Drug trafficking by air has been completely disrupted by the restrictions imposed on air travel and closure of borders imposed to prevent the spread of COVID-19, depending on the common mode of trafficking of each drugs prior to the pandemic. UNODC (2020) Research Brief revealed that heroin is mostly trafficked by land, often alongside legal cargo, whereas cocaine is mostly trafficked by sea, also using non-commercial craft such as specialized boats and yachts. While Synthetic drugs tend to be trafficked by air, with certain substances reaching some countries in large proportions, which is carried out by air couriers using body packs or concealing drugs in their personal luggage.

Given the almost universal restrictions imposed on air traffic, the supply of drugs by air is completely disrupted in Nigeria. However, because marijuana is locally produced in the country, the pandemic effects appears not to drastically hinder its trafficking. Similarly, there are increasing reports of local production of methamphetamine. Available evidence reveals that drug trafficking and illegal laboratories are the two main factors motivating the current methamphetamine availability and use in Eastern Nigeria. Emeka and Ikenna (2021) confirms that the NDLEA has discovered illegal laboratories where methamphetamine is produced in Enugu and Asaba. These laboratories according to the study were established by drug barons from Eastern Nigeria and their foreign counterparts.



Modes of transportation, by substance (as a percentage of weight seized), UNODC Drugs Monitoring Platform, January 2017–April 2020



Source: UNODC, 2020

The Lockdown and Cannabis Trafficking in Nigeria

There are growing indications the lockdown is increasing demand for cannabis as it remains the most used and trafficked substance by Nigerians. In general, due to its local nature, trafficking in cannabis is not affected in the same way as trafficking in heroin or cocaine, given that cannabis production often takes place near consumer markets and traffickers are thus less reliant on long, trans-regional shipments of large quantities of the drug (UNODC, 2020). Report of the NDLEA (2019) confirms that since cannabis sativa is the only substance that is grown in the country, it has long been the most popular illegal substance in Nigeria. The entire South West, North Central, and a portion of the South-South provide an ideal forest and atmosphere for the production of the illegal drug crop. The country's North West and North Eastern regions always see a spike in the sale of the gathered weeds. Media reports indicates that the lockdown and restriction on interstate movement, did not stop those who indulge in the illicit business from trafficking them to other states of the country. The deployment of Technology Mediated Communication Channels (TMCC) for the sales and distribution of illicit drugs is reported to be on the increase. For instance, between January and June 2020, operatives of the anti-narcotic agency apprehended 6,465.23 kilograms of Cannabis

which were been conveyed from Kano to Kogi. Another seizure of 3, 962 kilograms of Cannabis was made en route Kano at Benue; and another seizure of 1, 960 kilograms of Cannabis was made in Edo. Also, 621. 0857 kilograms of cannabis was recovered in Imo and 267.123 kilograms of Cannabis in Abia state, all during the lockdown period (Vanguard, 2020). Besides, the drugs dealers turned to heavy consumers because they could not move across the states to peddle drugs. This also led to cheapness of hard drugs and thus availability to consumers who apparently sat at home all day due to the movement restrictions (Business Day, 2020). Thus, cannabis continues to maintain its leading position in terms of trafficking and prevalence of use both before the lockdown and during the lockdown restrictions. According to the NDLEA (2019), the pattern of drug usage and illegal drug trafficking seems to be shifting in recent years. Prescription drug seizures have increased dramatically, which suggests that users prefer these medications to Cannabis sativa. Contrary to cocaine, heroin, and cannabis sativa, these narcotics are easily bought over the counter and are simple to conceal from the general public. Pharmaceutical medicines are equally alluring because, in a nation that detests drug misuse like Nigeria, they may be veiled and concealed from the undiscerning populace.

Annual prevalence of drug use by gender in Nigeria, 2017

	Men		Women		National	
	Estimated prevalence	Estimated number ^a	Estimated prevalence	Estimated number ^a	Estimated prevalence	Estimated number ^a
Any drug use	21.8	10,850,000	7.0	3,430,000	14.4	14,300,000
High-risk drug use	0.6	319,000	0.12	57,000	0.4	376,000
People who inject drugs	0.12	61,000	0.04	18,000	0.08	80,000
By drug type						
Cannabis	18.8	9,360,000	2.6	1,280,000	10.8	10,640,000
Opioids	6.0	3,010,000	3.3	1,606,000	4.7	4,610,000
Heroin	0.1	71,000	0.03	16,000	0.1	87,000
Pharmaceutical opioids (tramadol, codeine, morphine)	6.0	3,008,000	3.3	1,600,000	4.7	4,608,000
Cocaine	0.1	71,000	0.04	21,000	0.1	92,000
Tranquilizers/sedatives	0.5	270,000	0.4	212,000	0.5	481,000
Amphetamines	0.3	161,000	0.2	77,000	0.2	238,000
Pharmaceutical amphetamine and illicit amphetamine	0.2	96,400	0.1	58,100	0.2	155,000
Methamphetamine	0.1	69,500	0.04	19,000	0.1	89,000
Ecstasy	0.4	211,000	0.3	129,000	0.3	340,000
Hallucinogens	0.03	16,500	0.02	10,000	0.03	27,000
Solvents/inhalants	0.5	248,000	0.1	51,000	0.3	300,000
Cough syrups	2.3	1,157,000	2.5	1,200,000	2.4	2,360,000

UNODC drug use in Nigeria, 2018



The National Drug Law Enforcement Agency (NDLEA) and drugs trafficking control

According to Ugwukwu et al (2012), on numerous occasions, law-abiding and well-intentioned Nigerians have been subjected to humiliating searches, detentions, and unflattering remarks at our local airports, but especially at international airports, on the grounds that they may be drug traffickers. The result of this unfavorable opinion is that Nigeria's reputation has been severely damaged by drug trafficking, to the point where any Nigerian living abroad is thought to be a prospective drug dealer.

In an effort to combat the dangerous problem of drug trafficking in order to improve the country's reputation, the Federal Government of Nigeria has taken/established a number of actions (such as decrees, laws, reorientation programs, and agencies, etc.). Most Prominent of which is the establishment of the National Drug Law Enforcement Agency (NDLEA).

Ediomo-Ubong and Richard (2018) maintains that the government has maintained an unrelenting war on drugs since 1966, when the first legislation on psychoactive chemicals in post-colonial Nigeria went into effect, with the goal of "exterminating illicit drug trafficking and consumption in Nigerian society.". The NDLEA (2019) confirmed that in response to the 1988 United Nations Convention against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances, the National Drug Law Enforcement Agency (NDLEA) was founded in 1989 to coordinate drug control efforts in Nigeria. Prominent among the eighteen point functions of the Agency as captured in the NDLEA Act (CAP N30 LFN 2004) include: (a) The enforcement and the due administration of the provisions of the NDLEA Act; (b) The coordination of all drug laws and enforcement conferred on any person or authority, including Ministers in the Government of the Federation, by any such laws; (c) Adoption of measures to identify, trace, freeze, confiscate or seize proceeds derived from drug-related offences or property whose value corresponds to such proceeds; (d) Adoption of measures to eradicate illicit cultivation of narcotic plants and

to eliminate illicit demand for narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances with a view to reducing human suffering and eliminating financial incentives for illicit track in narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances etc.

Ediomo-Ubong and Richard (2018) explains that the NDLEA takes a military strategy to combating the drug problem, concentrating on the interdiction of drug shipments in ports and airports, the eradication of the production of narcotic crops, and the arrest and prosecution of drug criminals, including drug users. However, the apparent success of drug control, as evidenced by arrest statistics and drug seizures, comes at the expense of civil freedoms and public health. Its mission is to "enforce laws against the cultivation, processing, sales, trafficking, and use of hard narcotics." The NDLEA is a paramilitary organization. The agency's 18 duties include eradicating illegal narcotics plant production, arresting and prosecuting drug offenders, confiscating and/or seizing the property or revenues of drug-related offenses, and interdicting drugs.

The daunting challenges notwithstanding, the NDLEA has been successful judging by conventional standards of drug prohibition. For example, in 2008 Nigeria was certified by the United States for the eight successive times (Ediomo-Ubong and Richard, 2018). The nation has won praise for its accomplishments in the fight against drugs as well as for its successful collaboration with the US in combating money laundering and drug-related crimes in West Africa. The NDLEA has been successful when evaluated by output measures like arrest rates and drug seizure rates (NDLEA, 2018). The agency's actions have had a minimal effect on the supply and use of illicit substances, nevertheless (Ediomo-Ubong and Richard, 2018). The very psychoactive substances that the NDLEA battles tenaciously to banish are nevertheless freely accessible in the nation and are used by the populace with the ensuing health and socioeconomic issues.



Theoretical Frameworks

The Social constructivism and social construction of technology (SCOT) theories formed the theoretical basis of this study. Lev Vygotsky, a post-revolutionary psychologist from the Soviet Union, created social constructivism. According to this approach, rather than simply absorbing information passively, learners actively create new knowledge. (Paul 1998, Farhan 2019). On the other hand, Rather than just being derived from direct observation of physical reality, the social construction of technology (SCOT) theory postulates that some concepts about physical reality are the result of collective agreement. The theory's key tenet is that meanings don't emerge independently from one another but rather collaboratively with others. Thus, it argues that “technology does not determine human action, but that rather, human action shapes technology. It also posits that the ways a technology is used cannot be understood without understanding how that technology is embedded in its social context”. Leeds-Hurwitz (2009)

From the backdrop of the foregoing therefore, these theories emphasizes how man's actions could trigger the utilization of technology. As people experience the world and reflect upon those experiences, they build their own representations and incorporate new information into their pre-existing knowledge by way of collaborative nature of learning. Knowledge develops from how people interact with each other, and the social distancing idea occasioned by the COVID-19 pandemic measures altered culture, and society at large; motivating reliance for drug trafficking and distribution on the need for technology to cope with the new dynamics of the drug world. As it is in history, Drug barons rely on new/Alternate routes for trafficking and distribution of their illicit consignments. Deployment of technology with cartel groups to create building blocks and learning from others would help them construct their own knowledge and reality to sustain their business. Thus, the immediate needs, interests, problems and solutions of chosen social groups influence technological choice. This fuelled the impetus for the use of Technology Mediated Communication

Channels (TMCC) for the sales and distribution of illicit drugs.

Discussions and Recommendations

Effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on drug markets and on the ability of Nigeria to control drug production, trafficking and use requires adaptive and quick responses as it appears to be altering the pattern and trend of drug trafficking. To start with, drug market disruptions may lead to an increase in harmful drug use practices and could fuel new strategies by drug trafficking syndicates in a bid to overcome the obstacles. In order to circumvent the consequences of street enforcement, drug users may visit the darknet more frequently, and drug delivery via mail may gain popularity. As already observed by the NDLEA, drug tracking trend in the country has taken a slightly different dimension since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. The use of online platforms for sales of drugs and home service delivery services is gaining prominence (NDLEA, 2021). This trend is typical of the drug trade in which barons are always in search of alternative routes to continue trafficking. It was in a similar circumstance, given the US hard stance on drug trafficking that Nigeria was discovered as a transit route for international drug trafficking in the 1980s (Ugwukwu et al 2012). The emerging pandemic induced online drug trafficking is also in conformity with Jaishankar's 2008 Space Transition Theory which explains crime causation in relation to opportunity of movement from the physical to cyberspace for continued crime perpetration(Jaishankar, 2008).

The economic downturn occasioned by the COVID-19 pandemic also seems to be leading to further increases in drug production, trafficking and use. The crisis may drastically alter the drug market and worsen the socioeconomic circumstances of disadvantaged populations, leading them to turn more frequent illegal activity. Given the movement restrictions, much of the trafficking that obtains are largely local. Cannabis remains the most trafficked and prevalent drug in the country. Between January and June 2020, it accounted for the largest chunk of seized drugs because, out of 580,130.5 kilograms of drugs



seized, cannabis weighed 469,246.4 kilograms apart from the 2.9 kilograms destroyed. Tramadol seizures were made in almost all commands in the country, with a total of 32,709.43 kilograms. The non-medical use of codeine cough syrup was equally noted as the total seizure weighed 68,198.98 kilograms.

Besides, more and more people may turn to illegal activities to make up for lost licit income and unemployment. Emeka and Ikenna (2021) confirms NDLEA's discovery about Enugu and Asaba as sites of clandestine methamphetamine production facilities. The study claims that drug lords from Eastern Nigeria and their foreign rivals founded these laboratories. With the domestication of these factories, substance switching is also gaining popularity. Methamphetamine (*Nkpulummiri*), Tramadol, Codeine etc. are being switched with cannabis. The use of public flogging to punish known methamphetamine users by youth organizations and vigilante groups is reported in the media, although it is not made clear how effective this punishment is. Although empirical evidence indicates that methamphetamine use is motivated by weight control, the grey literature has placed the blame on youth unemployment.

The NDLEA should be well-resourced to be able to perform better in view of the emerging pandemic induced new dimensions to drug trafficking. Provisions for the establishment of rehabilitation facilities that can absorb quitters of drug related habits should not only be encouraged but also intensified.

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